

# Focusing on the Core to Lead School Improvement

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## **Suggested Questions for Discussion Groups**

Watch the DVD or the presentation by Richard Elmore. Form a group of professional peers who are working on school improvement, e.g., a group of principals, a building professional development leadership team, and a collaborative team. Select a few of the suggested discussion questions below that pertain to your work, and facilitate dialogue about what you learned from the presentation.

1. Dr. Elmore asked the participants to describe a specific classroom where there are high levels of instructional practices and challenging academic content. In your small group, generate a list of practices that you would like to see. Are these in place in every classroom in your setting?
2. Discuss Elmore's position on the need for educational leaders to have an identifiable practice. What are some of the advanced knowledge and skills that are needed in your setting? What are some skills that you might want to add to add to your professional development plan?
3. Why is working collectively on improving professional practice critical to our profession?
4. Dr. Elmore talked about the importance of addressing both content knowledge and pedagogy, and what happens if teachers aren't strong in both. What are the long-range implications for the students that you are accountable for, if teachers are lacking in content knowledge and/or pedagogy ?
5. Think about the three organizational conditions: Responsibility, Accountability, and Expectations. Describe how these conditions are addressed in your workplace. Are all three aligned? Do you have high transparency of practice? Explicit norms, processes and structures for accountability? High support? High agency?
6. Did listening to Elmore's description of the subtractive value of teaching (students losing ground as they progress through the grades) raise any red flags for you? What does your district's data look like?

7. Do you have “1,000 missing hours of instructional time”? What can you do to decrease interruptions and non-instructional use of time?
8. What is the difference between a congenial culture and a culture where trust and collaboration produces coherence and high levels of performance? Are you collaborative structures following the Iowa Professional Development Model?
9. How do you orchestrate pressure and support? Does your leadership generate a sense of competence and collective action? Are you enabling others to learn and so you can use the results of that learning to shape a common agenda for your organization?
10. Dr. Elmore suggests that allowing norms of volunteerism signals that there is not a serious message about school improvement. He advocates pushing directly on norms of volunteerism. What are the norms in your school about engaging in and implementing collective professional development? How do you manage processes that keep everybody engaged in capacity building?
11. What would you notice if you followed one student throughout the school day? What does Elmore say about issues of discipline and controlling behavior? Are there ways you can address establishing a positive environment by making learning more engaging?
12. Discuss how leadership functions shift as you move from the technical to the cultural. What does it mean to be a person who is “more of a servant than a manager”?